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'And this is where all the dead letters come to, those without stamps or return addresses,' said Mr Finch as he slid a dull brownish key into the lock and stepped over a spilt mailbag. ‘We’re not heartless people of course. We send the first two free of charge and put it down to human error, but by the third and fourth it’s apparent they’re scum who think they can ride the mail system for free. And as we both know Charlie, that is not the case.’

Charlie stood in the centre of the room and tried to count all the rows of pigeon holes, each marked with a letter and a roman numeral. He tried to imagine how many thousands of hours had been spent by those who had written those letters, imagined them sitting by firelight, under a desk lamp, scribbling a postcard on a station platform. He imagined their faces, long and short, shallow and lined, and of all the gallons of ink they had stained upon paper as simple testimony that they had lived and been.

‘I know you’ve only worked on the counter but I want you back here sorting out all this old mail. We’re supposed to destroy it after two years but it’s been a while since we’ve had anyone go through this lot.’ He gestured at the mound of mailbags spilling from the storage locker. ‘It’s pretty simple. Go through all the mail and sort it into its respective pigeonholes. They’re arranged by name and then the zone number – the zone map for New South Wales is on the wall over there. All of the letters have the date received stamped on them, so if they’re over two years old you can put them straight into the disposal chute.’ He pointed to a large hole in the wall marked Incinerator. ‘Got that?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good,’ Mr Finch continued, ‘I expect there will be no trouble. I’ll check in on you every few hours but I wouldn’t say this would take more than a few days at the most. If you do a well enough job you may just earn your reprieve and find yourself back on the front counter.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘No trouble, no trouble. Hard work will always be rewarded here at Australia Post. We pride ourselves on valuing every job – whether you’re just a postal clerk like yourself, a deliveryman or one of those suit-wearing types in HQ, every job contributes to the efficiency of the postal service.’ Mr Finch’s voice began to trail away as he walked off down the corridor. ‘It piss-easy though, so don’t dare mess this up!’
‘Yes, sir,’ Charlie replied as the door slammed closed.

The room smelled of moth nests and old ladies. Charlie pulled a stool up to the table and, casting a reproachful look at the storage locker, began to thumb through a pile of letters.


Three cups of coffee and a sack and a half later and Charlie’s hands no longer seemed his own. They functioned. They picked up each letter, moved it to eye level, placed it in a pigeonhole or in the disposal pile, and then moved onto the next all in a matter of seconds. But his eyes were glazed, his mind elsewhere. What do people do when they have nothing at all to do? Do they make up something new to do? Or out of habit do they prefer to re-do something they’ve already done? Does it–Charlie slapped himself in the face.

Stop it. Concentrate, you chump. No more mistakes. This is it. And as much as you keep telling yourself that money doesn’t matter and that work is for the senseless, there’ll be nowhere to sleep next week if you don’t reach another pay check.

He took a deep breath and picked up another letter, this time holding it in front of his eyes until he had read the full name and address, verifying the date as he slid it into its respective pigeonhole. As he did, several dust-coated letters in the corner tumbled, stirring dust into the dank air. Wrought with a dry, dusty cough he pulled the letters out and began rubbing them clean against his pants.

Tam,

52 Crescent Avenue,

Bellevue Hill,

NSW, 2023.

There were five of them in total, all addressed to the same woman. The date stamps on the back showed they were over three years old and had been posted only a few weeks apart from each other. Though they had yellowed, the beautiful cursive style was still clear upon each envelope. All were without stamps.

Charlie put them down on the desk and looked at them. He then picked them up, flicked through them and replaced them again. He moved them to the corner of the desk and began sorting through the other letters. Five minutes later he had opened the first one, marked September 5th, and had begun reading it.
Dear Tam,

I’ve been staying with Cissy for the last week and a half. Her parents know about it but we keep telling them that we’re working on a major assignment for school so they don’t mind, and besides, they’re hardly ever here anyway. She has a sofa in her room and with a blanket and a cushion it’s comfortable enough. I think I’m starting to get on her nerves though. She wants to invite Joel over but doesn’t have the guts to tell me I can’t stay any longer. I feel bad for her but Joel’s a jerk anyway.

I went through with it too – I left school. Well, I didn’t leave exactly, I just didn’t go back. My History teacher, Mr Riles, told me to stay back after class on Friday. He’s the third teacher to make me do so in the last week. He told me that my grades have been slipping over the past few months and with our finals only weeks away he wanted to know if anything was wrong and in what way he could help me. He said that feeling the pressure is quite normal but that there are ways of dealing with it and that there is always a solution. I know you won’t believe it was me but I told him to go fuck his solutions, that there aren’t always answers and that believing in that kind of crap will only lead to pain and disappointment. I didn’t even bother getting my bag, I just walked out of the room. Don’t get me wrong, I felt bad when I was on the bus back to Cissy’s place – after all, Mr Riles has just had a baby and you always hear the other teachers saying how generous he is – but I just can’t deal with their shit anymore. All their grades and ranks and expectations. We’re all going to die. We’re all going to suffer. I just don’t see why they should have the right to prolong my suffering.

Cissy doesn’t know about it. She knows I’ve been skipping school but she doesn’t know I’m not going back. Most days I just buy a bottle of bourbon and sit in the park watching the overweight mothers gossip while their spawn throw sand at each other in the playground.

I think I’ll stay with David next. His family has always liked me and I don’t think he’ll mind if I’m there for a few days.

Stay safe,

Tracey Morisot

There was a shuffle in the corridor outside. Charlie stuffed the letters under the pile he had been sorting and placed a few more in the pigeonholes. After a couple of minutes he slid Tracey’s letters back out and took his knife to the next one, dated September 15th.
Dear Tam,

The nightmares are back. I thought I had shaken them for good but last night I was sleeping at Michelle’s and she woke me up around 2am telling me I was screaming in my sleep to ‘stop’ and to ‘leave me alone’. She was as white as Reflex paper and her little body was shaking beneath her nightgown. I was covered in sweat and had red marks from where I’d been scratching at my arm. She’s a sweet thing though. She got me a towel and some water and even though I could tell she was scared as anything she sat with me and we talked about how sleazy Jack and Daniel are and questioned why on earth Millie is dating David.

I didn’t tell her that I saw it happen again. In my nightmare of course. There was just so much darkness. Then within the darkness I could see the end of my bed and these arms came reaching out from the bedposts, burning like coffee, with long pointed fingers and rough nails. The sun is out as I’m writing this but even so when I think about the feel of those nails it makes me anxious. I had to leave breakfast this morning when I heard the kettle scream. They don’t get it, Michelle’s family, they just smiled when I came back in and offered me some more Corn Flakes.

I need somewhere safe to sleep tonight. Somewhere I’ve stayed before where I know I’ll be able to fall asleep, otherwise I won’t sleep at all, not knowing the nightmares are there again. I tried to call Cissy but she wouldn’t answer her phone – we haven’t spoken since I left and it kept ringing out, so I know she chose not to answer. David’s away with his family for the week and Tyler said his parents won’t let me come over again, not this soon as he needs to concentrate on his exams.

I’ve been in this coffee shop for over two hours now and the barista keeps staring at me. I think soon they’re going to ask me to leave unless I buy something. My card declined last week and there’s too little left in my account. David’s been lending me a little but that won’t go on forever. Even stamps are a luxury now. I ran out last month but Millie says they still send the letters anyway. I hope these are reaching you.

I’ll try calling Marsha. She has a spare room. Fingers crossed.

Stay safe,

Tracey Morisot

Charlie lay the letter back on the desk and stared at the black characters of Tracey’s name. The ink had smudged a little, most likely when she had folded the letter, but he admired the curve of her hand. It was not a scrawl, not a rushed flick or an illegible line, but an actual signature, a personality made up of clear and definite lines embedded upon the fibres of the paper. He slid his knife under the lip of the next envelope and gently peeled it back. It was dated a week later.
Dear Tam,

I didn’t know what to do. I woke up at three last night and heard Marsha’s parents fighting. Her mother was shouting about how ‘damn good Samaritans’ they are, how they never put a foot out of line or tread on anyone else’s toes and how ‘this is precisely what happens, what happens every time’. That they always get ‘swindled’. Her father was speaking in a calm, measured way, like a train announcer. He was explaining that Marsha was ‘better than that’, that she knew not to get involved, that they’d raised her well. But her mother didn’t believe it. She said that all it would take was ‘a couple more days and a couple more sips’ and Marsha would get caught in the same trap. I heard them say my name but it didn’t sound like mine. Not the way they said it. The bitch called me ‘a no good runt’. I didn’t need to hear any more. I tossed my clothes into my backpack and climbed out the window. I didn’t even say goodbye to Marsha.

I’d been out this late before of course but always with friends after some party. When I’m with them I like wandering the streets at night. It feels like you own them. That you can walk anywhere. That the world is yours until the sun comes up and no one can tell you otherwise. But it’s different when you’re alone. I didn’t know where to go. It was too late to call anyone. And besides, who would I have called? There’s only really David now, and he told me on Thursday that he can’t give me any more money. His parents are getting suspicious and he doesn’t want to get caught. So I just walked around. I walked around until the sun came up and when it did I went and sat on a bench in a McDonald’s car park. I felt hungry watching the cars go through the drive-thru but at least I had somewhere to sit. I stretched out and put my backpack under my head and promised myself I wouldn’t fall asleep, but I was tired and the sun was warming me up and I couldn’t help it.

It was okay though. One of the employees, a boy just a bit older than me, came and woke me up. He gave me a Bacon and Egg McMuffin and a cup of coffee and said it was a shame that I was out here so early in the morning. He told me the boss said she didn’t want to see me out here again but that this once they wouldn’t do anything about it. I was numb from the warmth of the sun. I didn’t even feel embarrassed or nervous. I just got up, took the McMuffin and started walking again.

I’ll walk again tonight if I’m not too tired. I don’t know how far I’ll get but it’s better than sitting still. You don’t get so cold or bored.

Hope you are staying safe,

Tracey Morisot

Charlie looked over the bags of mail that lined the wall. There were close to a dozen of them, not to mention the sea of letters that had spilled out onto the floor. On top of the pile he
had been sorting was a letter marked ‘EVICITION’ in large red letters. The sight of it made him frown.

Tracey’s voice was running over in his head. The bitch called me ‘a no good runt’. ‘At least I had somewhere to sit’. ‘This once they wouldn’t do anything about it’.

Charlie sorted the rest of the letters left on the table and got up to empty the disposal pile down the incinerator chute. The letters rustled like leaves as they fell into the darkness below.

The next letter was dated October 16th.

Dear Tam,

Sorry I haven’t written for so long. I’ve been quite busy.

I can’t dream anymore. I don’t sleep very much – it’s hard to when the old men are always around, you just can’t trust them – but I don’t think that’s it. I just can’t dream. Whenever I close my eyes I don’t see anything. No images come to mind. Nothing exists up there in my head. Instead, I feel. I feel those long, spindly fingers crawling up my arm and across my stomach and I want to throw up. I want to tear the skin from my body so that those fingers can’t touch me anymore. I don’t like to close my eyes and give those fingers the excuse – the right – to come crawling. But I no longer need sleep to feel them. They’re there whenever I close my eyes, I sense them when I blink, and opening them again can’t make them go away.

If I talk to people, which I don’t do that often, the fingers leave me alone. I think they’re afraid of other people finding out about them.

I haven’t seen my friends in over a month and my phone credit has long since expired. They never called anyway. I don’t even know how I’d react if I were in their shoes. They’re just normal people. No one can blame them.

I couldn’t sleep in the park last night. There were cops around and they were telling all the men to leave and when they saw me they just shook their heads and told me to go home. I wandered around for a while, but I was so sick of the light pollution. I can deal with the cold but seeing those colours last night made me so angry. I just want there to be darkness, straight darkness, no lights from the houses and the street lights and the office blocks. Just darkness. Seeing that light made me so tired and I knew I couldn’t sleep because the fingers would be there.

I was walking near the Justice and Police Museum and I saw this man with a ute stopped by the edge of the road smoking a cigarette. I asked him for one and he seemed surprised to see me out so late. After a bit of coaxing he gave me one and we stood there by his car smoking and talking. It was nice knowing the fingers weren’t there, that they couldn’t come back while I was smoking. The man was from Brisbane. He was down visiting his brother who’d made himself sick doing drugs. We smoked for a while and then he said he’d have to get going and asked if I wanted a lift anywhere. I said, ‘Sure, I’d
love one,’ and flashed my eyes at him, the way that used to drive David mad. His beard was rough and he smelled like foul eggs but I let him get with me in the car and in return he let me sleep on the sofa in his motel room. I left in the morning before he woke up but when I checked my bag I realised he’d taken a pair of my panties and I felt the fingers again, crawling one by one down my arms. I spent the afternoon in the back of a churchyard scratching them until they bled and the fingers were gone.

I don’t know if these reach you anymore but I hope they do.

Stay safe and healthy,

Tracey Morisot

By now Charlie’s heart was beating fast. He could see Tracey’s silhouette grinding in the car, could see her soft figure curled up in the sanctuary of the motel, her legs slinking away with the ebb of the morning breeze. There was a certain tragedy to her – Charlie could not deny that. But in her words there was also a sense of resolve. She had long made her peace with this unforgiving place. Though she lay curled up on a park bench or asleep in a stranger’s motel that was not her, not the woman she had wanted to be. It was a projection, a construction for the role she had been forced to play. But she took strength in playing this role, he could see that. Here he was in the back room of a post office, relegated after a confrontation with a prissy customer, with no more to his thirty-three years than a high school certificate and a tiny apartment whose only visitors were his brother and his landlord. And though he still had a roof over his head and a warm bed to turn into at night, he envied how she could meet each day just like the one before, how she could pass it without collapsing over dirty laundry or swearing for hours at a showerhead.

The last letter was dated three and a half months later and consisted of only a handful of words scribbled on the back of a postcard.

On my way to the North Coast with Chris. Never been there before but he says it’s beautiful. He wants us to live in the countryside together and open up a retreat for injured animals. He tells me all the time how much he likes me and he keeps the fingers at bay. I know he’ll hold my hands when it happens.

Love always,

Trace
Charlie flipped the postcard over. On the back was a picture of a nondescript lake at sunset. There was not even an addressee. The hand was a frantic scrawl, the antithesis of the long cursive style he had been so drawn to, and it was written with a felt marker, the lettering all blotchy like that of a child’s.

Charlie swore. This can’t be all. There has to be more. She had turned her back on the world, accepted it and moved on. You can’t come back to the world after you make your peace with it, after you accept it for the repetitious devil it is. He tore the letter in half and belted the table with his palms.

There was a scurry outside and Charlie saw a figure run past the frosted glass towards the front of the store. As if he had just been swindled in a game of poker, Charlie stared at the fragments of the postcard scorning Tracey’s juvenile handwriting and her hapless dreams.

‘What’s this? What’s going on in here then?’ Mr Finch marched through the door, his shadow looming over the bags of unsorted mail. ‘Charlie, what the hell are you doing with those letters? And why aren’t you sorting this mail?’

Charlie was staring hard at Tracey’s postcard. There was still one more thing he needed to know, something he had to find out at all costs. He stuffed the postcards into his jacket and strode past Mr Finch and out the door.

‘What the –? Come back here, Charlie. I swear, this is it. If you don’t come back here right now –’

It was not yet five o’clock but if he was lucky there might be a van back in the garage by now. He heard Mr Finch’s threats die away as he walked past the long lines of passive customers, out the front of the store, and round to the garage next door where the postal vans were housed. The garage was empty but for a handler at the back who waved at him from behind a clipboard and a single red van marked ‘Australia Post’. He grabbed the key from the rack in the office and drove off, Tam’s address face-up in his lap.

* * *

The house was a three-storey suburban mansion, perched at the top of a hill with a set of iron gates at the front, granite paving and a water fountain with an angel that sprayed water several feet from its mouth. There was no response on the telecom. Charlie double-checked the address. 52 Crescent Avenue, Bellevue Hill. This was indeed number fifty-two. The blinds were closed and it looked as though no one was home, but there were two security cameras blinking above the gates and the grass looked freshly mown. It had been three years of course, but Tam had lived
here and maybe even lived here still. He had to know to where the letters had been sent to – why to Tam – and he knew that if anyone knew where Tracey was now, Tam would be that person.

Unlike most of the houses in the street, the house next door had no front gate and instead was a small, squat one-storey terrace with a Japanese-style garden out the front. An elderly woman answered with a polite but reserved smile.

‘Yes?’
Charlie cleared his throat and tried to slow his breathing.
‘Yes?’ she lowered her gaze.

‘Sorry to trouble you. My name is Charlie. I’m with the postal service.’ He gestured to the Australia Post van parked on the kerb and saw her little body relax a little. ‘I’m trying to get in touch with the house next door regarding their mail but they seem to be out. Do you know when they’ll be back?’

‘The ambassador and her family are away on holiday at the moment. They won’t be back for another week yet.’

‘The ambassador?’
‘Yes, the ambassador. Is there anything I can do to help in the meantime?’

‘Well, we found some undelivered mail for a person named Tam living at that address and wished to deliver it.’

‘There’s no Tam living in that house.’

‘The mail is a few years old, it’s quite possible they have moved out since then.’

The woman squinted at Charlie. ‘No, that’s not possible. The ambassador and her children have lived there for more than ten years. You must have the wrong address, I’m afraid.’

Charlie was becoming flustered. ‘The letters are of some importance. Would you happen to know if the children are friends with a girl named Tracey by any chance?’

‘Tracey Annabelle?’

‘No, not quite. The letters are from a Tracey Morisot.’

‘Tracey Annabelle.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘That’s Tracey Annabelle. Ambassador Morisot’s daughter.’

Charlie looked at the small mansion with its tightly manicured lawns and double garage.

Tracey Annabelle Morisot. T.A.M. Tam. She had been sending the letters to herself, going to the trouble of writing and posting them. Letters that may never have even been read.

‘You say you have letters from Tracey?’ the old woman asked.
‘Yes. Does she still live there?’ Charlie’s heart was pounding. He could see Tracey walking along the driveway to the car, chatting with her friends in the garden, sneaking out through one of the second-floor windows – and then he thought of her riding in a stranger’s car and sleeping in some dirty hotel off the side of a highway.

The woman’s brows crossed but her lip frowned and she looked almost sad.

‘I’m afraid not. She died almost three years ago.’

‘No –’

‘She was found dead in a hotel bathroom up north.’ The woman sighed. ‘She was such a sweet child, but as she got older she just got involved in the wrong kind of scenes. Her mother was notified by the state police. The hotel manager had found her after receiving complaints about a foul smell. She had drunk a whole bottle of nail polish remover and wasn’t found for nearly a week. The manager said she had been travelling with someone, a young man, and the police eventually found him camping out by a lake a few kilometres further up the motorway. He was in a bad state. Apparently he’d been there when she’d killed herself. They’d been drinking and she asked him to come into the bathroom with him and hold her hand while she did a trick. She downed the entire bottle of nail polish remover and collapsed in his arms. He succumbed to the fumes but when he awoke and realised what had happened he panicked and fled. It was all a pretty terrible business.’

Charlie was shaking his head. Though the words were coming out of her mouth, he refused to believe that she could even be talking about the same Tracey. Tracey had made her peace with the world, she was no longer fighting it. She had not given in to it. She was still a part of it, facing each and every day, and her resolve gave her the strength and confidence to do so. It had to.

‘If you have letters from Tracey they won’t do any good now. You may as well get rid of them.’ The woman turned to go back inside.

‘Wait!’ Charlie grabbed her by the sleeve.

‘Yes?’ she scowled.

‘But the letters, they show the reason why. That she was being – that her mother was –’

The woman looked Charlie straight in the eyes. ‘Yes, we all know what her mother was doing.’

Charlie stood wide-eyed. ‘Well why didn’t you –’

‘We all knew it was happening. It wasn’t our place.’

‘But Tracey’s dead. You could have stopped that.’

‘It wasn’t our place,’ the woman concluded and slammed the door shut.
Charlie swore. But it did nothing. He swore again. Still nothing. And then he smashed his fist into the angel-shaped knocker, striking the little bell. He hit the knocker again, this time taking effort to strike the angel square in the face. The entire door rattled and the bell chimed out once more, producing an even, rhythmic sound despite the heavy shock. Blood stained the angel’s face and though Charlie saw the broken skin upon his knuckles, flaking and bruised, he felt no pain. They no longer were his hands. They were just hands.

As he walked back through the woman’s garden he stopped to throw Tracey’s letters into the lily pond. He watched as the words bled and the paper sagged beneath the weight of the water, withering into nothing in a matter of seconds. For a while he sat beside the van and watched the blood congeal around his knuckles, his eyes hardly moving, his breathing deep yet steady.

When dusk fell he began to walk the streets.